

The Next **Ten Years**

This chapter addresses three inter-related areas which the Commission will face with its new and existing partnerships during the next ten years. These include the Challenges, which must be responded to if the Heritage Corridor is to fully realize its regional potential; the Core Commitments, which are central to achieving the Commission's long-range mission; and the Integration of the New Communities, which poses its own set of issues and opportunities. Taken together, *The Next Ten Years*, outlines a strategy for the Commission and its partners to achieve a visible, lasting legacy for the future.



The Strategic Plan for the Next Ten Years begins with the industrial heritage story and the countless ways its legacy continues to shape the future of the Valley.

THE CORE CHALLENGES: RESPONDING TO THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE



The Commission's "story-driven" approach to heritage development assumes that its industrial history story should be well told by a core number of visitor sites and programs.



The new Mass Turnpike interchange with Rt. 146 promises to become a significant catalyst for growth at Worcester's gateway to the Corridor.

As the Commission looks toward the next ten years, it will draw upon the lessons learned from the past in responding to emerging issues posed by the new communities, while it maintains the momentum of the partnerships it has established in the existing communities. One of the central lessons learned by the Commission is how to leverage limited human and financial resources to carry out a broad, geographically wide mission. It has learned to do this successfully, largely by relying on a combination of public education, public-private partnerships, and targeted investments. This proven formula will continue to guide the Commission's work in the future as it engages a core set of issues, described below, that remain at the heart of the Commission's goals and objectives:

The Story. The issue here centers around the need to communicate a heritage story of national significance over a large, two-state region where thousands of people continue to live and work. Over the last decade, the Commission and its many partners have helped lead a tremendous effort to identify and interpret these resources and build local awareness. However, the story is still not widely available to national or, even, to New England audiences. Perhaps the largest challenge is that the story is both thematically complex and geographically spread out. A further challenge is the lack of infrastructure for heritage tourism development. Nonetheless, a significant opportunity exists to develop the area as a national visitor destination by linking key historic sites in the region through marketing and interpretation that would enable the Blackstone Valley to take its place among leading New England historic destinations.

Town and Village Centers and Mill Complexes. The challenge here is to preserve and revitalize



Unmanaged growth threatens to produce suburban sprawl patterns that displace the cultural and natural landscapes which are critical to the Blackstone Corridor's public appeal to residents and visitors alike.

many of the key historic centers that define the man-made character of the Blackstone Valley. Without them, the ability to interpret the heritage story of the Valley is impossible. More importantly, there are established communities whose economic and social viability is essential to the long-term success of the rest of the Corridor. Ongoing development trends toward suburbanization and decentralization of infrastructure threaten to accelerate in the Valley as the local economy recovers. A major catalyst for growth at the northern end of the Corridor is expected to be the new Massachusetts Turnpike interchange for Rt. 146, along with associated route access improvements into Worcester. As more new investment is directed toward undeveloped areas around regional highways like Rt. 146, disinvestment in old mill towns and historic village centers, continues to threaten the Blackstone Valley's historic townscape patterns. These are the very settlement patterns, characterized in the Corridor's Interpretive Framework as the "Farm to Factory" story, which have given the Valley its distinct physical character since the early 19th century.

Cultural Landscapes. Due to their seemingly "natural" appearance, these areas, such as pasture lands, present a test perhaps more difficult than preserving the core historic town and village centers. This is particularly true along the riverways, which are key to the Blackstone Valley's historic character and appeal. As economic vitality in the region re-emerges, pressures for suburban develop-

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ment in “greenfield” areas of the Valley will increase. By contrast, public workshops held this year and in the recent past by the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce indicate that local residents wish deeply to conserve the open space qualities of their region, particularly along the major roadways. The growth effects associated with regional highways and emerging employment centers, such as in Smithfield, RI, threaten to accentuate a highly visible process of suburban sprawl which is displacing cultural and natural landscapes that are key to the Blackstone Valley’s public appeal.

Riverways. The future of the Blackstone River, with its tributaries and watershed lands, is challenged by effects of historic and modern growth patterns. The impacts of two centuries of manufacturing, together with inappropriate land uses and development characteristics harmful to riverways have resulted in poor water quality. The fluctuating river levels related to hydropower generation demands have adversely impacted wildlife habitat and promoted riverbank erosion. Other related issues include the increasing probability of structural problems with aging mill dams, the principal danger of which is both flooding and the unleashing of built-up, toxic bottom sediments down-

stream. These toxins could, in turn, threaten much of Narragansett Bay’s fishing industry. More than two decades of federal mandates for clean water and pollution control demonstrate that continued progress is possible: indicators of some forms of pollution show declines of roughly two-thirds. The Commission should expect to continue advocating for clean-up in a coordinated and collaborative manner with the appropriate public agencies which shoulder regional responsibility for this task.

THE CORE COMMITMENTS

In order to maintain an essential balance between existing commitments and new partnerships likely to be forged throughout the new communities, the Commission has identified four basic objectives, outlined below, which are the source of its core programmatic goals for the next ten years:

1. TELL THE STORY OF THE AMERICAN INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION BY...

...completing the task of telling the Valley’s full heritage story through a richly detailed system of sites and other interpretive venues which dramatically convey the contributing role of each Valley community in the birth and development story of the American textile industry.

...headlining the Valley’s nationally significant story through the development of a core visitor experience which tells the story of the Birth of the American Industrial Revolution in New England - the epic tale of birth, growth, maturation, and transition which characterize all aspects of the textile story. It tells of the technological innovations in manufacturing and transportation, to social transitions from farm to factory, and from the flowering and decline of the industry to the physical and social legacy available for future generations.



Four core commitments - Telling the Story of the American Industrial Revolution; Preserving and Enhancing the Valley’s Communities; Balancing Conservation and Growth; and Promoting the Recovery of the River - will shape the Commission’s working agenda over the next ten years.



The first Core Commitment focuses on the national significance of the Blackstone’s formative role in the early American Industrial Revolution.



The Blackstone River, with its tributaries and watershed lands, is challenged both by effects of past industrial uses and modern growth patterns.



*The second Core
Commitment focuses on the
continued need to preserve
and revitalize the Valley's
towns and village centers.*

...and by shaping a Core Visitor Experience throughout the Story Chapters by employing automobile, train, bicycle, and river “pathways” to special places within the Corridor representing chapters of the heritage story, linked by a signage system which allows transitions from car to bicycle to river craft as part of the heritage travel experience.

2. PRESERVE AND ENHANCE VALLEY COMMUNITIES BY...

...preserving and restoring key interpretive resources: Work with potential partners through planning, incentives and education to strengthen preservation-oriented revitalization programs in key communities which would preserve areas of key significance that tell the story.

...enhancing economic opportunity and the quality of life: Launch programs to make town and village centers more competitive for preservation-related investment.

...and demonstrating the linkage between preservation and enhanced communities: Demonstrate where historic preservation and conservation of natural resources can create enhanced value and community amenities which attract and retain residents and businesses.

3. BALANCE CONSERVATION AND GROWTH BY...

...expanding the Commission's commitment to preserving valuable cultural and natural landscapes: The Natural Resources Inventory, appended to this plan, identifies many of the key

*A third Core Commitment
underscores the delicate but
necessary balance needed
between stimulating eco-
nomic growth and conserv-
ing the natural and historic
places of the Valley.*



resources and recommends a prioritized strategy for their conservation.

...maintaining distinct and appropriate edges to historic places: Appropriate zoning and local decision-making, based upon comprehensive planning and resource assessment, is critical to containing inappropriate sprawl and focusing growth in already developed areas where public infrastructure exists.

...and providing education and case studies to equip local decision makers: Problem solving forums and progressive land use techniques can help stakeholders manage and direct growth for a healthier region.

4. PROMOTE RIVER RECOVERY BY...

...reinforcing the Commission's commitment to improving the health of the River system: Existing local, state and federal environmental programs should be augmented by more regional cooperation and the application of new technologies and insights to create appropriate management practices for the River and its watershed. The lands and waters of the Blackstone Valley must be understood as an intricately linked natural system.

...increasing public awareness: Education remains the foundation for building public support for the conservation of natural resources connected to the River watershed.

...and facilitating public use and enjoyment: Opening the entire length of the Blackstone River to more public recreational use and appreciation is central to the goal of the Blackstone Bikeway project, which is developing a “greenway” path with multiple points of public access between Worcester and Providence.

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INTEGRATING THE NEW COMMUNITIES INTO THE ACTION AGENDA

Within the context of the Corridor's rich national and cultural resources are its 24 municipalities which encompass a 46-mile-long Valley Corridor between east-central Massachusetts and northern Rhode Island. Twenty of these communities have been part of the Corridor since 1986, but four of them, and a remaining area of Worcester, are new members added by Congressional authorization in 1996. This expansion has resulted in a significantly larger Heritage Corridor. The boundary area is, in fact, now 60% larger than the original Corridor. The challenge with this larger territory is to maintain the ongoing Action Agenda established by the Management Plan, while integrating the new communities into this agenda and helping them define their role and contribution to the Core Commitments outlined in this Plan supplement.

Progress to date in integrating the new communities has been rapid. Partnerships have already been created in places like Chepachet, RI, where walking tours with NPS rangers along the Chepachet River, have been initiated. Worcester has become a strong partner in the environmental cleanup of the Blackstone headwaters, and has been active in planning for a northern gateway visitors center for some time. As early as 1986, the Quinsigamond Village neighborhood of Worcester participated in a Massachusetts DEM study for a visitors center. In Smithfield, RI, a documented history of the Woonasquatucket River has been created, and, in Leicester, a high school curriculum for industrial history has been developed.

In March 1997, two Welcome Workshops, one in Worcester, MA, and the second in Burrillville, RI, were held by the Commission to solicit ideas and recommendations from the public for future heritage projects in the new communities. At both meetings, four identical sets of questions were put to the participants, who included local community and business leaders, private citizens, organization

directors, and local public officials and elected leaders. Some of the recurring themes heard at both meetings included the need for comprehensive planning which made the connection between natural, cultural and historical resource protection. This was of special concern in light of the future impacts anticipated by the improvements to Rt. 146; the re-use of abandoned mills; the revitalization of older Main Street areas; the continued cleanup of the Blackstone River and its watershed tributaries; the development of a Corridor-long greenway that would include a multi-use path for hikers and bicyclists; and the need to accommodate real growth while discouraging suburban sprawl which adversely impacts the historic character and natural systems of the Valley.

Given the strength of the interests voiced at those public workshops, the Commission's earliest actions in the new communities will focus on linking the Corridor's heritage story in the public's mind to those places by means such as:

- **Heritage Corridor gateway signs at the new town boundaries;**
- **Site-identity signs at historic villages, such as Leicester Common, Harmony, Chepachet, Harrisville, Georgiaville, and key Worcester sites;**
- **Walking tour brochures;**
- **updating the Historic Resources Inventory to include important historic properties, districts and landscapes representative of Valley themes, and architectural and cultural diversity;**
- **Production of television programs that focus upon the new communities;**
- **Cooperation with the City of Worcester to program public space for Heritage Corridor interpretation at Union Station, now being restored, and the development of a visitor center at Quinsigamond Village, in the vicinity of Hurley Square, as part of a Rt. 146 gateway entrance into the City from the new Massachusetts Turnpike interchange.**

THE NOMINATION PROCESS FOR THE NEW COMMUNITIES

In the period between 1993 and 1994, several communities in the Blackstone River Valley began



The fourth Core Commitment reaffirms the Commission's longstanding goal to promote recovery of the Blackstone River and encourage greater recreational use of its resources by the public.



During the course of the Boundary Study in 1995, the Commission looked for evidence that the new candidate communities were both functionally, ecologically and historically integral components of the Blackstone region.

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The new communities offer several excellent examples of historic resource types that promise to contribute to the Commission's ability to tell the heritage story in Rhode Island. In Smithfield, for example, the Smith-Appleby House is an intact 18th century farmhouse evoking the agrarian, colonial period predating the industrialization of the Valley.

petitioning for inclusion in the Heritage Corridor. Their petitions prompted a boundary study by the National Park Service to assess the significance of their historic and natural resources, as well as their potential for creating effective partnerships with the Commission. During the study, the Commission looked for evidence that the new areas were "functionally, ecologically and historically integral components of the Blackstone region." Applicants were expected to show a willingness to, and prior evidence of, adopting the Blackstone Corridor's strategy of protecting natural, cultural and historical resources — while working in collaboration with the Commission and other public- and private-sector partners.

Perhaps most compelling in this study process was the new communities' collective potential to bring most of the Blackstone River's remaining watershed lands, including its headwaters, into the Heritage Corridor. By enrolling these communities voluntarily in the improvement and protection of the Blackstone River watershed, the Commission was able to take great strides toward its long-term goal of integrating natural resource management with land-use planning, cultural resource protection, local community revitalization and economic development. From an interpretive standpoint, the new communities also offered several excellent examples of historic resource types, such as rural mill villages in Burrillville, Smithfield and Glocester, which would contribute to the Commission's ability to tell the industrial heritage story in Rhode Island. In Smithfield, the Smith-Appleby House offered an intact 18th century farmhouse evoking that agrarian, colonial period

predating the industrialization of the Valley. An important interpretive connection also existed in Leicester, where Pliny Earle's knowledge of the carding process contributed to Samuel Slater's initial attempts at improving his cotton thread-making machinery, ultimately leading to great advances in the early industrial revolution.

What the New Communities Brought to the Table

— Evidence of the new communities' existing commitments to long-range planning and development goals promoted by the Commission already existed as well. Three of the candidates in Rhode Island, for example, had developed comprehensive town plans that addressed natural and cultural resource protection. One of the three, Glocester, had created historic district zoning to protect the early Rhode Island market and mill village of Chepachet, which was cultivating a new image as an antique center. Leicester, an early Quaker community in Massachusetts, had developed a balanced program of resource protection and understood the need to protect the headwaters of the Blackstone. Worcester had also completed comprehensive planning for historic and natural resources and developed a city-wide trails plan which included a greenway and trail system along its portion of the Blackstone River. Many others had put together Heritage Corridor action committees to strengthen their candidacies.



The Town of Leicester in Massachusetts has developed a balanced strategy for resource protection which understands the need to protect the headwaters of the Blackstone River.